PARADOXES FROM HELL
THOMAS LIGOTTI

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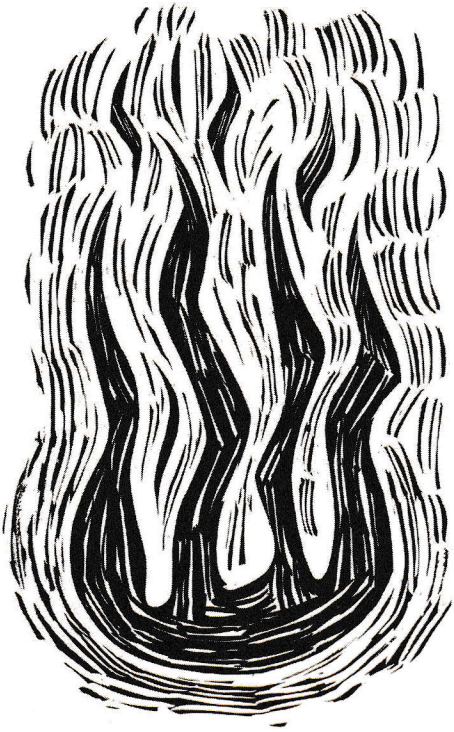

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I HAVE A SPECIAL PLAN FOR THIS WORLD

I

When everyone you have ever loved is finally gone
When everything you have ever wanted is finally done with
When all of your nightmares are for a time obscured
    as by a shining brainless beacon
    or a blinding eclipse
Of the many terrible shapes of this world.
When you are calm and joyful
And finally, entirely alone,
Then, in a great new darkness,
You will finally execute your special plan.

II

One needs to have a plan, someone said,
Who was turned away into the shadows
And who I had believed was sleeping or dead.
Imagine, he said, all the flesh that is eaten
    the teeth tearing into it,
    the tongue tasting its savor,
    oh, the hunger for that taste.
Now take away the flesh, he said,
    take away the teeth and the tongue,
    take away the taste and the hunger,
    take away everything as it is—
That was my plan, my own special plan for this world.

I listened to these words and yet did not wonder
If this creature whom I had thought sleeping or dead
Would ever approach his vision so special to him
    perhaps in his deepest dreams
    or his most lasting death
Because I had heard of such plans, such visions,
And I knew they did not see far enough,
That what was demanded—in the way of a plan—
Needed to go beyond tongue and teeth
    (and hunger and flesh)
Beyond the bones and the very dust of bones
And the wind that would come
To blow the dust away.

It was then I began to envision a darkness
That was long before the dark of night
And a strangely shining light
That owed nothing to the light of day.

III

That day may seem like any other day.
We will feel the tiny-legged trepidations
And be mangled by a great grinding fear.

But that day will have no others after—
No more worlds like this will follow,
Hence, no more trepidations or fear.

Because I have a plan, a very special plan,
To crush it all into a shapeless stain
Like a filthy little spot on a wall somewhere.

IV

There are but four ways to die,
A kind of spirit revealed to me.
There is dying that is relatively sudden,
There is dying that is relatively gradual,
There is dying that is relatively painless,
And there is the death that is full of pain.
By these means all dying occurs
And there are no others.

Even after the voice ceased speaking
I listened for more words about dying.
Some days this struck me as so important
And other days no great thing at all.
It was such a matter of confusion,
One that called for a special plan.
Yet all I heard were the faintest echoes
About the four ways to die
And how there were no others.

Some decisions seem so difficult,
Especially the four ways to die—
The why and when of it
The generalities and particulars.
But finally the spirit spoke again—
There was a special plan for us all,
A precise manner we each will go
That was always in the works.
And though unknown, it is true,
A fearful weight upon our minds,
At least it was something to know
That ultimately life gives us a break
And in the end will take charge,
So that we may be always dumb as dirt
To a choice that was never ours to make.

V

There are no means for escaping this world.
It penetrates even into your sleep,
    And is its substance.
You are caught in your own dreaming
    Where there is no space.
You are held captive where there is no time,
And can do nothing you are not told to do.

There is no hope of escape from these dreams
    that were never yours.
The very words you speak are only its very words.
    And you talk like a traitor
    Under its incessant torture.

VI

There are many who have designs upon this world
And dream of wild and vast reformations.
I have heard them talking in their sleep
Of elegant mutations and cunning annihilations.
I have heard them whispering in the corners
    of dark, desolate houses
And in the alleys and narrow backstreets
    of this crooked creaking universe,
Which they—with their new designs—
    would make straight and sound.

But each of these designs is deranged in its heart,
For they see this world as if it were alone and original,
And not as only one of countless others
    whose nightmares all proceed
Like a hideous garden grown from a single seed.

I have heard these dreamers talking in their sleep,
And I stand waiting for them
As at the top of a darkened flight of stairs.
They know nothing of me,
And nothing of the secrets of my special plan,
While I know every single step . . . of theirs.

VII

It was the voice of someone
Who was looking at the moon,
Waiting for me to turn the corner
    of a narrow, ill-lit street,
And stand with him in the dull glaze
    of a pale, fading night.

Then he said to me in a low, dark voice
That my plan for this world,
My special plan, was a crude mistake.
Because, he said—
    there is nothing to do
    and nowhere to go;
    there is nothing to be
    and no one to know.

Yes, I said, I know you are right—
    you are speaking to no one
    on his way to nowhere
    with nothing to do
    when he finally gets there.
Good to have met you all the same,
But he was gone before I got his name.

VIII

The children always followed him
When they saw him hopping by,
A funny walk, a funny man—
He made them laugh sometimes.

He made them laugh, oh yes he did.
He did, he did, he did, he did—
Oh, how he made them roll.

And then this funny little man
Who made them laugh
(Sometimes he did)
Took them to a secret place
To tell them things they had never heard,
Funny things about this and that,
About such and such and so and so,
But mostly of his special plan,
His very special funny plan,
Hoping they would understand
And maybe laugh sometimes.

He made them laugh, oh yes he did.
He did, he did, he did, he did.
But something happened to these kids—
Their eyes grew wide between their lids,
They shook and screamed and rolled about—
Oh, how they rolled and rolled.

IX

I first learned the facts from a lunatic
In a dark and quiet room that smelled
    like stale time and space.
There are no people—nothing at all like that—
The human phenomenon is but the sum,
The densely coiled layers of illusion,
Each of which winds itself upon the supreme insanity
That there are persons of any kind
When all there can be are mindless mirrors
Laughing and screaming as they parade about
    in an endless dream.

But when I asked the lunatic what it was
That saw itself within these mirrors
As they marched endlessly
In stale time and space,
He only rocked and smiled.
Then he laughed and screamed,
And in his black and empty eyes
I saw for a moment—as in a mirror—
A formless shade of divinity
In flight from its stale infinity
Of time and space and worst of all
In this world's dreams—
My special plan for the laughs and screams.

X

We went to see some little show
That was staged in an old shed
    past the edge of town.
And in its beginnings all seemed well.
The miniature curtained stage glowed
While those dolls bounced along on their strings
    before our eyes.
And in its beginnings all seemed well.

But then there was a subtle turning point,
Which some had noticed—and I was one—
Who quietly left the show—though I did not,
Because I could see where things were going
As the antics of those dolls grew strange,
And the fragile strings grew taut
With the pulling of tiny limbs.

The others around me became appalled,
And turned away, abandoning the show
That was staged in an old shed
    past the edge of town.
You see, I was witness to what should not be.
I wanted to see it and be amazed
By a moment of consummate disaster
When puppets turn to face the puppet master.

XI

It was twilight, and I stood in the grayish haze
of a vast empty building
Where the silence was enriched by a reverberant voice.
All the things of this world, it said,
are but of one essence
for which there are no words.
This is the greater part, which has no beginning or end.
And the one essence of this world
for which there can be no words
Is but the sum of all things of a defective creation.
This is the lesser part, which had a beginning
and shall have an end—
The spectacle for which words were conceived
solely to speak of.
The tiny broken beings stumbling through their existence.

Now remove these words and what remains?
the voice asked me
As I stood in the twilight of that vast empty building.
But I did not answer the question, which became
a whirlwind of echoes
circling around me.
I remained silent until the echoes died and twilight
passed into night.
And I felt my special plan—
for which there are no words—
Moving towards a greater darkness.

XII

There are some who have no voices
Or none that will ever speak,
Because the things they know about this world
And the things they feel about this world—
Because the things that fill a brain
    that is a damaged brain
Because the pain that fills a body
    that is a damaged body
Exist in other worlds,
Countless other worlds,
Each of which stands alone in an infinite empty blackness
For which no words have been conceived
And where no voices are able to speak—
When a brain is filled only with damaged thoughts
When a damaged body is filled only with pain,
And stands alone in an infinite empty blackness,
    and exists in a world
For which there is no special plan.
    no special plan—
    no
    special
    plan.

THIS DEGENERATE LITTLE TOWN

I

The greatest secret,
Which appears in no religious doctrine
And is found nowhere
In the world's overburdened library
Of myths and fables
Nor receives the slightest mention
In any philosopher's system
Or scientist's speculation—
The greatest secret,
Perhaps the only secret,
Is that the universe,
All of creation,
Owes its existence
To a *degenerate little town.*
And if it were possible
To strip away the scenery that surrounds us,
To pull up the landscape of every planet,
To rip away the skies
And shove aside the stars and suns,
To tear from ourselves our own flesh
And delve deep into our bones,
We would find it right there . . .
The origin of all things
Visible or invisible,
The source of everything that is
Or ever can be—
This degenerate little town.
And then we would discover
Its twisting streets and tilting houses,
Its decaying ground and rotting sky.
With our own eyes
We would see the diseased faces
Peeking from grimy windows.
Then we would realize

Why it is such a secret,
The greatest and most vile secret—
This degenerate little town,
Where everything began
And from whose core of corruption
Everything seeps out.

II

From the beginning,
If there was a beginning,
This degenerate little town
Has become ever more degenerate—
Its streets more twisted,
Its houses more tilting,
Its ground more decayed,
And its sky more rotten.
Those faces behind ever more grimy windows
Have become ever more diseased.
And in the end . . .
But there can never be an end,
Not for this degenerate little town,
No more than an end will ever come
For the worlds that have seeped out of it.
Because everything we know
Has always been degenerate—
Everything more twisted and tilting,
More diseased and decayed,
Rotting from the very sky.
This is the law of things
In a world, in a universe,
That has its source and origin
In a degenerate little town,
If there was a beginning,
And will go on with its degeneration,
Its ceaseless twisting and tilting,
Its disease and decay,
Its infinite shades of rottenness,
Until all that exists
Is less than nothing.

III

We cannot help but wonder
In our most perverse moments
What it would be like
To inhabit this degenerate little town
Where the sky is forever dripping its rottenness like rain—
To be among those faces
That are diseased faces
Peeking through the glass of grimy windows
And out into twisting streets
Lined with tilting houses
In a town that is constantly degenerating
And continues to degenerate
With each passing moment.

We cannot help but wonder
In our most perverse moments
As we look through bleary eyes
And see the stars spread out
Like so much glittering debris
Scattered across the blackness
Without any apparent order—
An infinity of shining litter
That will never be picked up.

And yet we still stupidly wonder
We still whisper to ourselves
Or cry out in our dreams
"Oh, where is the way to this degenerate little town?"

IV

There are those among us
Who claim to have seen
This degenerate little town.
Although they remain unaware
Of its true nature.
There are those who have emerged
From some painful ordeal of the body
When they felt their flesh
Rotting upon their bones
Or endured a derangement of mind
That caused them to speak
Of how they saw before them
An outline of emaciated houses
Tilting this way and that
Or walked along some twisting streets
And felt the ground soft with decay
Beneath their steps
Or even glimpsed those diseased faces
Their skin rough and pale as plaster
Peeking from behind grimy windows.

Those who claim to have seen such things
Are filled with a terrible conviction,
Though even they seem to hope
That their words are all lies or illusions—
That what they say they have seen
Could never have truly happened.
And so we stare at them suspiciously
As if with sadness or pity
Even if all the while we shudder
That the same could happen to us
If only in our nightmares
Which of course are as real
As the degenerate little town.

V

Where is this place?
This degenerate little town?
What is its name?
Who were its creators?
Such questions are inevitable
For those among us, sick beings,
Who can barely suffer an existence
That is overcast, suffocated,
By a terror of the unknown.

Throughout their lives
And in the face of death
Their questions only multiply.
Are there seasons in the land of this town?
Is there a springtime in which great rains
Pour down from that rotting sky?
Are there sultry summers that perpetrate
A heavy stillness within those twisting streets?
And what of its autumns?
Are they succulent with colors of decay?
Do the winters there, in this degenerate little town,
Pile weighty snows upon those tilting houses?

So many questions about this secret place.
And for those among us, sick beings,
One question is the most troubling—
That is, what is it that so afflicts
The diseased faces that gaze
Behind the glass of grimy windows?
Could we bear to know its nature?
And might it one day make its way
From that degenerate town to ours?
If nothing else, perhaps some questions
Are best left unasked and unanswered.

VI

Like every phenomenon
That is occult in its essence
This degenerate little town
Hides itself from itself.
Only those from elsewhere
Can adore its mysteries
And succumb to its allure.
They are blind to the truth
That beneath its rotting sky
Lurks a world of pain
No different from their own.
And by then it is too late.

Like every phenomenon
We have faced in our lives
However occult in its essence
This degenerate little town
Is only a tempting disguise
For festivals of anguish.
It gnaws at our bones
In ways we could not foresee,
Distracted as we had become
By its façade of tilting houses.

Ultimately we abandon hope
And settle our weary selves
Behind the glass of grimy windows
And stare out upon twisting streets.
This degenerate little town
Has always been our home—
A place of agonies perhaps
But as good a place as any other
To hide yourself from yourself.

VII

It may be quite likely
That we are grotesquely mistaken
To think there is anything special,
Anything remarkable at all,
About this degenerate little town.
Far from being the greatest secret
The worst or the finest of all our dreams,
It may quite likely
Be the greatest commonplace,
The supreme banality.
Consider the possibility—
Who has not loitered
Beneath a rotting sky,
A sky putrid with all
That has been heaved into it
During every epic of this earth?
This ground where we walk,
So soft with the decay of everything
That has ever lived upon it.
We know it well.
And who has not travelled
Through twisted streets
And under the shadow of houses
Even the straightest of which,
If our eyes could only see it,
Is veering toward a tilt?
As for diseased faces—
They are all-prevailing
To the point of embarrassment.

And so much for this civic marvel
That is beyond the blackness of night
Or resides deep in our bones.
Yet if this is the case,

As it quite likely may be,
What remains for us in a universe
Where there is nothing special,
Nothing of any account—
Let alone the saving miracle
Of this degenerate little town?

VIII

It seems entirely natural that,
Should anyone gain full knowledge
Of this degenerate little town,
They would deny the truth
Of this greatest, most terrible of secrets
And would fabricate some other
Set of circumstances
As a means of protecting
Their individual well-being
And that of all living things.

This would explain so many
Of the deranged idols and beliefs
That have arisen in our world.
At least we would be able to account
For the multitudes of Mannequin Saviors
As one might view them,
Their faces smooth and serene
Behind display windows,
Welcoming the faithful who
Upon their death,
Will enter a department-store paradise
Of the most vague and intangible delights.

And some mention must be made
Of what might be called
The Sect of the Puppet Lands,
Whose highly deranged adherents
Posit a transcendent universe
Of infinite and harmless antics
That are imperfectly mirrored
In the chaos and crises of our own world.
For one truth we know—
This degenerate little town

Is a hypostasis of the one we inhabit . . .
And thus by logic is surpassingly awful.
Who would begrudge any of us
Our denials or alternate renderings,
For the sake of sweet sanity,
Of the twisted streets and tilting houses,
The diseased faces and grimy windows.
More than a mere reflection of known reality,
It is the very apex of its every aspect.
Thus, by virtue of this grim attunement,
Even the bravest among us must be allowed this lie:
That when the Great Puppet Play is concluded
We will enjoy a sweet bedtime of slumber—
If only until the next show begins.

IX

We sometimes imagine
That we have heard voices
Strange and harsh voices
Faintly calling from beyond
The blackness of night
Or from deep in our bones.
And even if there are no actual words,
No actual language we know
In which the voices speak,
Still there is a terrible understanding
Delivered into our world
That only a few may comprehend
And none would desire—
For this understanding,
This message of strange harsh voices
From beyond the blackness of night
Or from deep in our bones
Declares that this degenerate little town,
That greatest of secrets,
Is only a façade
Or a mirage,
A picturesque lie
Or illusion
In the guise of twisted streets and tilting houses—
All the rottenness and disease which we sense
As the source of all the things we know
Or can ever know.
In fact, it is something else altogether,
Something which none could comprehend
Or desire to comprehend
Yet which they cannot fail to hear
When it slips through the sounds
Of those strange and harsh voices
From beyond the blackness of night

Or from deep in our bones.
Indeed, it is something else altogether—
Not at all a tangible locus
We may depict by means of lyric invention,
But an unbodied entity, an abstract malice,
Whose sole attribute is known to us
As a hollow resonance
Of the most dismal laughter.

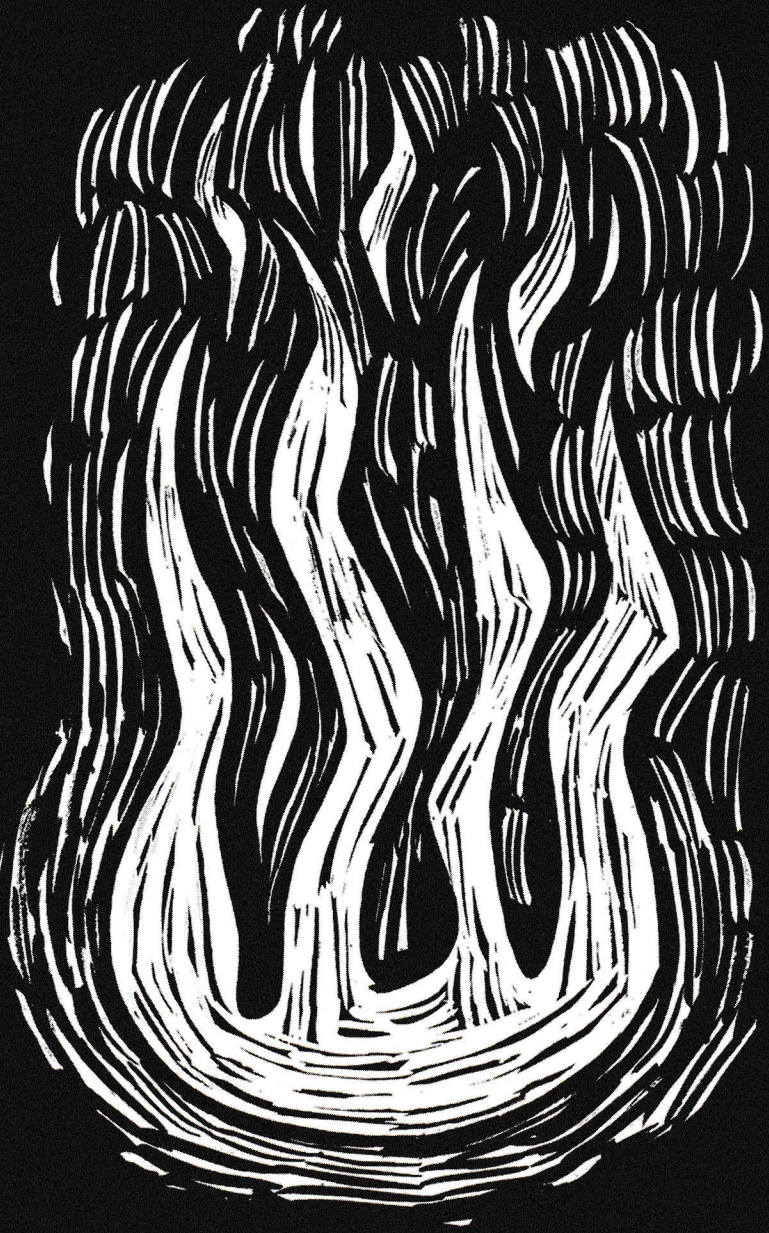
X

Even though there is no evidence
That a degenerate little town
Forms the greatest secret
And is the source
Of all the things we know,
Its truth and its existence remain assured
And there do seem to be certain indications
Certain aspects and elements of our lives
That in no uncertain terms
Inform us of one fact—
Sooner or later, we will find ourselves
At the mercy of this degenerate little town,
Whatever it may be—
Because when the sky
Begins to darken,
As if rotting before our eyes,
And when our bones
Begin to change,
Growing soft with decay,
We know that all the ways
Of our lives
Have been leading us
And can only lead us
To this degenerate little town,
As it is known to us.

And then we may understand
That everything around us
And everything within us
Has a direct point of contact
To that manifestation,
That source of all things.
Dreams, for instance,
The substance of our sleep,

Wherein every mind is destined
To go twisted and tilting
Into lands of swift magic.
These dreams alone make the case,
If anything were ever needed
In the way of evidence.
These dreams alone
Evidence our helpless dangling
Beneath the severe gaze
Of those diseased faces
Behind the glass of grimy windows,
As if they are waiting for
Someone to arrive,
As if they are waiting
For everyone, sooner or later,
To enter their little town
And be swallowed by it.

PARADOXES FROM HELL



The Decayed Mystic

Perhaps on some star-forsaken night, a decayed mystic first posed the question: Did the Divine willingly enter into the bargain of being, and for what gain? Taking into consideration that It screams by way of every mouth generated in this world, the agreement must have been based on some very harsh terms. So harsh, in fact, that a bottom line of bliss was barely conceivable to the decayed mystic, who has brooded for many years on its text.

And now he dreams of another Deity, one that is horrified to have realized the Creation and racked with aches of strangeness at how Its deal has turned out. But even though every living particle strives for a paradoxical condition, which may be termed a "state of pain," it could still seem to the Divine that It had bargained well. For there had to be an even more dreadful condition that the contract of suffering had escaped, something *worse* than pure, universal pain.

Consequently, the decayed mystic received a new lease on life and was revived by the negotiated agony. For now he dreams of that more excruciating mode of order prior to, and perhaps forever posterior to, the lesser evil of existence, and gives thanks to the Divine for the succor of a more moderate misery, a haven of relative perdition.

He also begins gearing up himself for the twisted task of having to rebaptize all the old torments with names of joy.

But let us not listen to such distressing language.

The Stricken Philosopher

It must have been some stricken philosopher who realized our will is free—but only to suffer, to throb at a second's notice. Nothing other than pure pain could prove our freedom, since alternatives are nonexistent. Hence, this poison is lapped up quite willingly by a beast that knows no other nourishment. Whether the decision is made in the garden or the torture chamber, the choice is clear: suffer or be damned! The proofs are a matter of record.

But our blind alley of torment proves much more about the world at large than about ourselves. How could we be free for one thing and the rest of creation for another? The truth is that we aren't. Pain is normal throughout all living, and perhaps nonliving, particles: it is the status quo without threat of subversion. All is in harmony with it; everything plays the tune. Flowers shrieking on a summer's day, wolves wailing in lairs of ice, worms mute with underground panic—all the keys and stops function perfectly, melodies of agonies are backed by chords of excruciation. While children whine in hospitals of gingerbread, the other voices in the worldly menagerie sing their parts . . . in the field and sky, in swamp and jungle, under seas and on mountaintops. The mysterious music persists without pause.

And who could will against it? Whose volition is sufficient to oppose the supremely normal order? Supposing this possible, wouldn't such a creature cease to enjoy the security of anguish, the safety of a well-established world of pain? This vile being would illicitly reap the damnation of a stone's peace, the contented paralysis of wax figures, and would escape from the barbs of nature only to enter into a supernatural Hell: a place where the mutually exclusive conditions of sensation and stupefaction coexist in impossibility. Only the gods can go there, and this actor of the will would become a god—a god on a slab, a god bound to the wheel, a god wrapped tight in red-hot chains.

But the wisdom of eons counsels all against the miseries of the escapee from pain. Everyone is forewarned and knows enough to avoid such a doom. Everyone except the stricken philosopher, who must fulfill his destiny of convulsions in the horrible contentment of a supernatural ruin. And only from an uncanny dungeon can his soprano howl into the chorus of nature, only from the shadows of the unreal can his voice join

the screams of the natural world, which to him sound like laughter or the sighs of an Edenic tranquility.

Must we leave him there? Of course.

The Deranged Poet

Was it not some deranged poet who began to eat truth as one partakes of strange and perhaps deadly fare in foreign lands? Little nibbles to start off, tiny nips which cause the tongue to tingle, a weird but not yet unpleasant sensation. He continues munching, whole mouthfuls by now. But already the meal is overwhelming in its oddity, an experience unreal yet hellishly tangible. Unfortunately, the deranged poet has also learned that he must keep eating if he doesn't want to end a permanent resident in one of those intolerably eerie dreams his feast has induced. He wanders now from dream to dream, hoping to find a way out of this maze of spectral indigestion.

But how does he know he is eating truth and not something else? He knows by the way each swallow feels as it goes down, by the way everything opens up a little wider within him, a little deeper each time, until there will be enough room to devour the universe and himself along with it. And he knows by the pain, which he cannot stop feeding if he doesn't want to *die hungry.*

Finally, his appetite for truth, for pain—the same thing by now—leads him to a paradise for the insatiable, the domain of the great deceiver. In Hell, the deranged poet feeds on all the infernal viands laid out for him, for these are the only things powerful enough to incite the pain, which is truth. In hopeless anguish, the deranged poet decides to give up eating altogether, allow the pain to abate, and suffer the consequences.

Unexpectedly, the consequences are a beatific satiation he has never known, a supernal glut of salvation beyond all his abandoned hopes. Unhappily, it lasts for no more than a few seconds before he is hungry again.

But of this new ravenousness it is best not to speak.

The Complete Madman

It could have been none other than a complete madman who just assumes that to be is to be in pain. He did not take into consideration those lapses from greater to lesser pains, those fluctuations which prevent the damned from getting a solid grip on their torment. The incomplete pain, the relative pain—obstacles to an ideal Hell in which a pure anguish may be enjoyed to the fullest without diluting intermediaries of alleviation. Anything else would be utter torture!

Having suffered the storms along pain's crooked margins, the complete madman prays to be delivered straight into the eye of pain. Here, all repose in the equilibrium of abandoned hope, the quietude of screams undisturbed by smiles, and even the agony of a perdition never to be exacerbated or relieved by the confusions of paradise. To dwell no longer in the anxious shadow of pain, but to step right up and merge with its mystical body—this is the dream! As if there were any other . . . .

But unspeakable complications intervene. The complete madman is tempted by the deceptions of Bliss, who says, "Come unto me, for without my blessings you will never know misery in all its actuality." "Lies!" counters the complete madman with all his lung power. He knows he is getting sidetracked by impure excruciations, that his guarantee of a perfect Hell has been undermined by the fine print of ease, that his black cacophony has been violated by melodic illuminations, and that nourishing additives have been slipped into his poisons. "No!" he protests. "I must not succumb to these false pains, this *mortal* flaying. I will submit only to an eternal sojourn in the pit of a thousand hooks!"

But the complete madman will never attain his deliverance, for his conscience is not clear. He believes it to be a pair of white wings for sailing into the blackness, though it is merely a muddied cloak which weighs him down with fears, indecisions, and all the compunctions of happiness. Never in good faith can he commit himself to ruin and thereby be saved. Never can he say with a pure heart: "Oh, most divine Hell, liberate us from that absolute joy which we have no hope of knowing."

One day, the complete madman becomes piercingly aware of his predicament and, in his despair, achieves a glorifying glimpse of his goal. But the vision quickly disperses, and afterward he is even worse off than before.

What happens still later to the complete madman is not for our eyes and ears.

Postscript

The decayed mystic, the stricken philosopher, the deranged poet, and the complete madman once got together to talk things over and check on one another's progress.

A record of their meeting is buried in the deepest archives of Hell.

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